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The Printed Cure: Yashoda Devi, *Stri Chikitsak* and the Politics of Vernacular Ayurveda in Colonial North India

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Abstract

This paper examines the Stri Chikitsak (Female Practitioner), the Hindi monthly journal edited by Yashoda Devi (1890–1942), as a significant site of vernacular medical print culture in colonial North India. Through this journal, Devi, the most commercially successful woman Ayurvedic practitioner of her time, created a public space for women's health knowledge that operated outside, and in tension with, the male-dominated structures of institutionalised Ayurveda. Drawing on the work of Charu Gupta and situating Devi within broader debates on vernacular print, gender, and indigenous medicine, this paper argues that the Stri Chikitsak was not merely a medical journal but a politically and socially constituted text, one that democratised Ayurvedic knowledge, gave literate women a public voice, and participated in the wider nationalist project of reclaiming indigenous healing, all at once.

Keywords: *Yashoda Devi, Stri Chikitsak, vernacular print culture, Ayurvedic women practitioners, Hindi periodicals, medical authority.*

Introduction

In the bustling print world of early twentieth-century Allahabad, a city that served as both the administrative capital of the United Provinces and a major hub of Hindi literary culture, one name stood out in the domain of women's health: Yashoda Devi. Born in 1890 to an Ayurvedic *Vaidya* (Practitioner) family in Badaun district, UP, Devi moved to Allahabad after her marriage in 1906 and, by 1908, had established her own *Stri Aushadhalaya* (Dispensary for Women). She was sixteen. By the time she died in 1942, she had built a medical and publishing empire that included a pharmacy, a publishing house (*Devi Pustakalaya*), a dedicated printing press (*Banita Hitaishi Press*), and dispensaries in Patna, Agra, and Banaras, in addition to Allahabad.

At the heart of this enterprise was a journal: *Stri Chikitsak*, a Hindi monthly devoted exclusively to the Ayurvedic treatment of women's diseases. With a circulation of approximately five thousand copies per month, it reached a remarkable breadth of readership for its time, particularly given the relatively modest rates of women's literacy in the region.[1] Letters arrived at Devi's dispensary from across India in such volumes that she eventually took a dedicated post box at her local post office, and letters addressed simply to 'Devi, Allahabad' reached her without difficulty.[2]

To write a paper on *Stri Chikitsak* as a print phenomenon is to engage necessarily and gratefully with the pathbreaking scholarship of Charu Gupta, who has produced virtually all the sustained academic work on Yashoda Devi. But it is also to ask questions that Gupta's important framework of gender and nationalist medicine does not always centre: What did it mean for a woman to own and edit a vernacular medical journal in colonial North India? How did the form and medium of the journal, the printed page, the postal network, and the subscription economy shape the kind of knowledge it could produce and the kind of public it could address? These are the questions this paper seeks to open up.

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Discussion

To understand the significance of *Stri Chikitsak*, it is necessary to situate it within the broader landscape of Hindi print culture in the early twentieth century. As Francesca Orsini has shown, before the 1920s, Hindi writing and literature were limited in their scope, agenda, participation, and readership was a predominantly elite, largely male enterprise.[3] The growth in literacy and print culture during the 1920s and 1930s altered this landscape substantially, leading to a surge in literary journals, political weeklies, and popular dailies. Vernacular print became a site for the articulation of community identity, social reform, and nationalist aspiration.

Within this expanding print world, medicine occupied a particularly charged place. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a proliferation of Ayurvedic texts in Hindi, a development closely tied to the revival of indigenous medicine as a cultural and political assertion against colonial biomedicine. As one study of the period notes, the number of printing presses in UP alone rose from 177 in 1878–79 to 743 in 1925–26, illustrating a booming demand for vernacular Ayurvedic texts.[4] This proliferation contributed significantly to public discourse on Ayurveda as an indigenous healing system opposed to colonial medicine. The printed vernacular text thus became an instrument not merely of information but of cultural politics.

It is in this context that *Stri Chikitsak* must be read. Yashoda Devi was, as Charu Gupta has observed, a figure who masterfully utilised the boom in commercial publishing to spread the knowledge of Ayurvedic healing.[5] But more than utilising the boom, she was constituting a specific kind of reader and a specific kind of reading public, one that was female, health-conscious, and engaged with the practical and intimate dimensions of bodily life.

The full title of the journal, *Stri Chikitsak*, meaning 'Female Practitioner' or 'Female Doctor', was itself a statement. In a professional world where Ayurvedic training was largely conducted in Sanskrit and effectively closed to women, and where the Ayurvedic *Mahamandal* and *Mahasammelan* (the major institutional bodies of the discipline) remained exclusively male domains well into the 1940s, the journal's title asserted a claim that there was such a thing as a female medical authority, and that she had something to say.[6]

What *Stri Chikitsak* said was, for its time, quite remarkable. The journal introduced into Ayurvedic vernacular discourse topics that had long been marginalised or euphemised in male-authored texts, including menstrual health, miscarriages, vaginal infections, sexually transmitted diseases, and the intimate experiences of conjugal life.[7] These were not merely medical topics; they were, in the social world of early twentieth-century UP, deeply private matters that a woman could discuss with neither her family physician (likely male) nor, in most cases, her female relatives with sufficient clinical precision. The journal, arriving monthly by post, offered something rare, a space in which these experiences could be named, analysed, and treated.

Gupta has noted that Devi encouraged women to venture out of their homes to seek treatment, to write detailed letters to her describing their problems, and even to stay in a rest house she maintained for patients undergoing extended treatment.[8] The journal was, in this sense, an extension of a spatial and social practice. It created a medical community of women across geography, mediated by text and posts. The reader of *Stri Chikitsak* was imagined as a correspondent, a patient, a fellow practitioner of domestic medicine. This is a distinctly different reader from the one imagined by the male-authored Ayurvedic journals of the period, which addressed a professional class of *vaidyas* debating classical texts and institutional legitimacy.

It is worth pausing here over the materiality of the journal itself. *Stri Chikitsak* was printed on Devi's own press, the *Banita Hitaishi Press*, owned technically by her husband Sri Ram Sharma but driven by her editorial and medical vision.[9] That Devi owned her means of production was not incidental to what the journal could say: it meant that her content did not pass through a male editorial gaze before reaching readers. The journal's existence as a commercial, privately owned enterprise also meant that it was accountable to its readers in a direct market sense. Its circulation of five thousand was a figure achieved through subscription and sale, not institutional patronage. This gave *Stri Chikitsak* a kind of popular legitimacy that the institutions of Ayurveda explicitly denied.

One of the most interesting dimensions of *Stri Chikitsak* as a print text is the way it constructs Yashoda Devi's authority. In an era when female medical practice was almost entirely informal and unacknowledged, Devi had to build her credibility through the journal itself, through the act of sustained, reliable, detailed publication. Her letters column, her case descriptions, and her remedies circulated repeatedly in print constituted a kind of vernacular archive of female medical experience.

Devi also borrowed strategies of textual authority from classical tradition. As Rachel Berger has noted, Devi gave her writings a sense of 'timeless wisdom,' referring to her cookbooks and health guides as *Pakshastras*, a term that invoked the authority of classical Sanskrit *shastras* (written scriptures) while rendering it accessible in the vernacular Hindi public sphere.[10] This was a double move; it aligned her work with the prestige of classical Ayurveda while simultaneously claiming that prestige for a female, non-institutionally trained practitioner writing in the vernacular for a female audience.

Yet this authority was constructed within, and could not fully escape, the social hierarchies of its moment. Charu Gupta's careful reading of Devi's writings shows that, even as she opened space for women's bodily experiences, she often reinforced dominant norms around heterosexuality, procreation, and the moral policing of male sexual behaviour.[11] Her writings promoted what Gupta calls a 'moral sexology', one that simultaneously challenged male patriarchal authority in medicine while upholding the ideals of the disciplined Hindu conjugal household. As one study has noted, even Yashoda Devi, with her expertise on women-oriented diseases, cannot be entirely cleared of reinforcing patriarchy.[12]

This tension between the radical act of a woman creating a public medical voice and the conservative social norms that voice often reproduces is not a failure of Devi's project but a constitutive feature of it. *Stri Chikitsak* could only address five thousand readers per month because it spoke in terms those readers could recognise and inhabit. Its compromises were also its conditions of possibility.

Yashoda Devi did not edit only *Stri Chikitsak*. She also produced *Stri Dharma Shikshak* (Teacher of Women's Duties, first published 1909) and *Kanya Sarvasva*, journals that together constructed an ecology of reading around women's domestic, moral, and medical lives. This is significant, it meant that *Stri Chikitsak* was not a standalone medical text but part of a broader editorial project that imagined the Hindi-literate woman as a reader with multiple needs and interests that included medical, domestic, moral, and intellectual domains.

This situates Devi's publishing activity within the wider phenomenon of women's journals in colonial India. As studies of women's magazines in this period have shown, publications like *Stri Dharma* in Bengal and *Bharati* in Maharashtra were important sites for the articulation of women's roles in the nationalist movement, social reform, and literary production. *Stri Chikitsak*'s contribution to this ecology was to insist that the female body, in its reproductive and sexual specificity, was a legitimate subject of public, printed knowledge. This was, in its own quiet way, a political claim.

It is also worth noting what distinguished Devi's journals from the more reform-oriented women's publications of Bengal and Maharashtra. Those journals were often embedded in networks of social reform movements, literary organisations, and male patronage. *Stri Chikitsak* was a commercial enterprise run by a practising clinician. Its authority came not from its association with reformist institutions but from Devi's own accumulated expertise and her readers' trust in her remedies. This gave it a different social texture, less explicitly political in the nationalist-reformist sense, but perhaps more deeply embedded in the everyday life of its readers' bodies.

The institutional response to *Stri Chikitsak* and to Yashoda Devi more broadly was one of studied indifference at best, active hostility at worst. The Ayurvedic *Mahamandal*, as late as 1941, remained a completely male domain. Male *vaidyas* filed a case against Devi, calling her remedies 'inferior' and 'inauthentic.[13] She was not mentioned in the established professional circles of *vaidyas*. The very success of her journal, its five thousand monthly readers, its sacks of incoming letters, was invisible to a professional establishment that had not legitimised her practice.

This institutional hostility is revealing. It tells us that *Stri Chikitsak* operated in a parallel public, a reading public that the institutions of Ayurveda did not control and could not fully regulate. The journal's

readers were not the guild of trained male Ayurvedic practitioners but the women of urban and semi-urban UP and Bihar who wrote letters describing their symptoms and received replies in print. Devi's authority was constituted through this reader-practitioner relationship, not through institutional certification.

In this sense, *Stri Chikitsak* offers a model of vernacular medical authority that is structurally different from both the institutionalised Ayurveda of the *Mahamandal* and the colonial biomedicine of government dispensaries. It is a model built on correspondence, on practical knowledge, on commercial trust, and on the medium of print. That this model was attacked by male Ayurvedic practitioners as 'inauthentic' only underlines how effectively it was operating outside their frameworks of legitimacy.

Yashoda Devi died in 1942. Her journals, her remedies, her dispensaries, and her postal community of patient-readers largely disappeared from the formal historical record, unacknowledged by the professional Ayurvedic institutions that outlasted her, unarchived in any systematic sense. It is only through Charu Gupta's patient excavation that this history has become recoverable at all.

Conclusion

What does it mean that the only Ayurvedic journal in colonial North India devoted exclusively to women's diseases was edited by a woman, commercially self-sustaining, institutionally scorned, and read by five thousand people a month? It means, among other things, that the history of vernacular medical print culture in this period is more varied and more gendered than existing archives suggest. *Stri Chikitsak* was not a footnote to the Ayurvedic revival movement but a distinct and significant strand of it, one that worked through different social networks, addressed a different reader, and constituted a different kind of knowledge.

As a site for future research, the journal invites several approaches that remain largely unexplored. A close reading of its actual content, its case descriptions, its letters column, its advertisements, its language and address would yield much about the self-understanding of its readers. A comparison with other women's health journals across South Asia in the same period would illuminate regional specificities. And a study of Devi's publishing networks, her printers, her distributors, her postal subscribers would recover the material infrastructure of this vernacular medical public sphere.

For now, what we can say is this: in the print world of early twentieth-century Allahabad, a woman with no institutional credentials built a medical public through the medium of a journal, and that journal reached people the institutions of Ayurveda could not or would not reach. The history of *Stri Chikitsak* is a history of what print can do when it moves outside the structures of professional legitimacy and finds its readers in the ordinary needs of everyday life.

Notes

1. Charu Gupta, “Procreation and Pleasure: Writings of a Woman Ayurvedic Practitioner in Colonial North India,” *Studies in History* 21, no. 1 (2005): 17–44, 22.
2. Charu Gupta, “Yashoda Devi, an Early-20th-Century Pioneering Woman Ayurvedic Practitioner,” *The Wire* (2025).
3. Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
4. S. K. Rai, “Gendering Late Colonial Ayurvedic Discourse: United Provinces, c. 1890–1937,” *History and Sociology of South Asia* 10, no. 1 (2016).
5. Charu Gupta, “Procreation and Pleasure”.
6. Saurav Kumar Rai, “The Curious Case of Yashoda Devi, a Woman Ayurvedic Practitioner in Colonial India,” in *Negotiating in/Visibility* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2025), 217–235.
7. Charu Gupta, “Procreation and Pleasure”.

8. Ibid.
9. Charu Gupta, “Yashoda Devi,” *The Wire* (2025).
10. Rachel Berger, “Between Digestion and Desire: Genealogies of Food in Nationalist North India,” *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 5 (2013).
11. Charu Gupta, “Vernacular Sexology from the Margins: A Woman and a Shudra,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 43, no. 6 (2020)
12. Saurav Kumar Rai, “Curious Case of Yashoda Devi,” 217.
13. Charu Gupta, “Yashoda Devi,” *The Wire* (2025).

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